

Forms of Self-Reflection in European Fiction in the Late 19th Century

Doctoral Theses

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Introduction

In my doctoral dissertation, I apply the term *self-reflection* to the narrative modes which tend to undermine the mimetic tradition in the fiction of the late 19th century, and to highlight the self-reflecting aspect of literary text. These occurrences are not unprecedented in the history of the novel; the different types of narrative self-reflection lead to the roots of fiction and connect with postmodern metafiction. My doctoral dissertation focuses on different forms of narrative self-reflection influenced by the art of painting. The study points out that at the end of the 19th century, there was an organic and mutual relationship between literature and painting, and in this period, the appearance of the new representational forms and the change of ideas about representation itself influenced upon the modern devices of prose technique. This way, the modernity of this period can be described as a cross over between the verbal and the visual.

The position of the classic modern period in the history of the self-reflecting aspect of the novel has not been made clear by literary critics. The intertextuality, the modes of parody, the puns or the anagrams can be considered as different types of self-reflection, as they somehow reveal their constructed origin. The text in the text, the figure *mise en abyme*, the ekphrasis can also be regarded as forms of self-reflection, but they sometimes work in an obvious way. These devices are significantly present (following some earlier examples) in the French “new novel” from the 1950s, and then in postmodern

metafiction. European fiction at the end of the 19th century can be characterized as a functional change in metanarration, which was already present in decadent aestheticism.

Intention

The aim of the doctoral dissertation is to reveal the tendency towards to the adaptation of the new technical devices of European fiction in the underestimated or concealed Hungarian novel of the late 19th century, and to analyse the self-reflective aspects of fiction in the mutual influence between literature and fine arts. The paper requires the research of current theoretical trends in the fields of comparative literature and cultural studies, but its fundamental point of view remains in the perspective of literary history, because it makes observations about a period of literary history and about an aspect of the European novel within it.

Methods

The choice of the restricted period of the 1880s and the 1890s helps to avoid the confused historical view of self-reflection. The theory and ideas that decisively influenced my doctoral dissertation derive dominantly from the fields of narratology, history of art and psychology. In my thesis, from the various schools of narratology, I focus mostly on the ideas of visual narratology, which examine intermedial phenomena between pictures and words. This interdisciplinary analysis is based on the experience that a description of the constructions working like texts can be involved in the analysis of works of art, and that the paintings can be examined with the aid of the terminology of narratology, or that parallel phenomena

can be found between the visual and verbal technical devices.

The construction of my doctoral thesis is organised by representational devices, genres, artistic processes that belong to the terms of literary criticism as well as to the history of art, like the mirror, the frame, the portrait, the landscape and the fragment. Although not all of these can be entirely examined as phenomena of the art of painting and of the literary text at the same time – primarily because of the impermeability between verbal and visual –, they can represent comparative points of view if they involve the self-reflection from a creative or receptional aspect.

The doctoral dissertation engages with vast oeuvres and extensive receptions; among them, it focuses only on relative researches, essays, or works which are of importance from the given theoretical perspective. Besides the works of Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Paul Valéry and André Gide, the thesis deals with two Hungarian novels. This way, the thesis examines Hungarian, English and French works written in the same period, analyses them in their similarity, and tries to reveal simultaneous phenomena among them. This kind of simultaneous analysis is very interesting, because while the Hungarian literary canon does not estimate highly Zsigmond Justh's and Zoltán Ambrus's novels, the chosen European works are in the mainstream of international literary canon.

Construction and Results

In the first chapter, I examine the role of the mirror in the literary text and in the art of painting. The first critical

definition of reflecting mirror in the text derived from a detail of André Gide's *Diary* in which he introduces the term *mise en abyme* with the help of a particular heraldic image, his works of art, and certain examples from the field of literature and the arts. My study focuses on the context of this definition and on the first conscious adoption of *mise en abyme*. After a comprehensive analysis of the definition, I analyse how this artistic method was applied in Gide's three works. *Le Traité du Narcisse*, *La Tentative amoureuse*, and *Paludes* were written in the beginning of Gide's career, and they realise the self-reflecting function of the mirror in the text from different aspects.

The second chapter of my dissertation deals with four short novels from the 1890s by Henry James. *The Private Life*, *The Real Thing*, *The Death of the Lion*, and *Figure in the Carpet* intend to reply to theoretical questions about art and representation, and these questions are connected to James' ideas about the Arts. In these short novels, the role of frame and ekphrasis can be conceived as devices of the writer's visual perspective. For James, the analogy between literature and the art of painting is deeper than rhetoric: the intertwined nature of words and pictures weaves itself across the whole body of aesthetically self-reflective literature.

The third and fourth chapter examine narrative descriptions of an artistic genre: the portrait. First, I intend to define the function of the narrated portraits in *Midás király* [King Midás] by Zoltán Ambrus, then I analyse the ekphrasis of the portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. While the portraits

described in *Midás király*, real or virtual, serve as modes of the aesthetic way of life, Wilde's novel offers various types of the portrait of Dorian Gray by its "focalizers", which provokes the readers' ability to construct pictures, or invites them to a self-referential reading process. Thus the readers can regard themselves as models of the portrait.

The fifth chapter deals with the descriptive parts of *Művész szerelem* [Artist Love] by Zsigmond Justh, which offers a peculiar type of self-reflection. The analysis starts with the description of a character's appearance that can be conceived as a narrative representation of portraiture. Then, two narrated landscapes reflecting on their own compositions are examined. The aim of the chapter is to establish that most of the descriptive parts have the same function in the novel: they denaturalize the spectacle, representing a created visual structure which refers to the text itself. Thus the description is based on a narrative mechanism disavowing the realistic illusion. Finally, the analysis concludes that description can be regarded as *mise en abyme* in the novel, because the descriptive parts illustrate the priority of the artist's subjectivity in art just as the whole novel realises this aesthetic idea as well.

The sixth chapter of the doctoral dissertation is about the self-reflective levels of *The Evening with Monsieur Teste* by Paul Valéry. Monsieur Teste's vision is narcissistic and self-reflective: as he is simultaneously the object and the subject of his observation, the theme of the work can be conceived as the situation of self-reflection itself. On the second level of self-reflection, an ekphrasis is

situated, which is not a description of a real painting, but of a virtual one inspired by some of Edgar Degas' paintings depicting the interior of an opera-house. Degas' compositional technique and the insertion of view-fragments into the text lead to a change of codes between visual and verbal. On the third level, a fragmental perception of human personality can be found: the fragmental representation of the human body, the personality is separated in the subject and the object of vision, and the textual fragmentarity mirroring each other in the short novel. On the fourth level of self-reflection there is the autobiographical aspect as the mirroring structure of the comprehension.

Further Tendencies of the Research

According to the reception of the Hungarian literature at the end of the 19th century, the most appreciated genre of the period is the short story, the representatives of which belong to the forefront of world literature. Hungarian literary critics define the 1880s and 1890s as a transition period of searching for modern epic forms. My doctoral dissertation tends to modify this idea, because it attempts to reveal the modern artistic ideas and the new technical devices in the novels of Zsigmond Justh and of Zoltán Ambrus similar to contemporary English and French authors. The self-reflective function of descriptive parts in the novel of Zsigmond Justh is examined based on the analysis of descriptive elements in Marcel Proust's prose, and the narrative double-coding of ekphrasis in the novel of Zoltán Ambrus and of Oscar Wilde are examined side by side. The analysis of the novels point out similar authorial solutions in the same period, and prove that

Hungarian fiction (including the genre of the novel) was forming in parallel with European literary tendencies.

The statements of my doctoral dissertation lead to further research. Referring to the intermedial phenomena of the late 19th century, the self-reflective type of European fiction can be subject to further examination (for example *Imago* by Karl Spitteler or *The fog* by Unamuno) or with the initiation of architecture, photography, sculpture and music into the research, a more comprehensive treatise on self-reflection can be accomplished. As regards the points of view of the dissertation certain Hungarian novels in the late 19th century show great promise to further possibilities, like Sándor Bródy's Rembrandt Cycle, or the writings of the painter Lajos Gulácsy. As a conclusion, the end of the 19th century can be grasped as a peculiar period of the mutual influence of arts on each other in the history of the self-reflective aspect of fiction.

Publications

“Hasonlóság és öntükrözés – A *mise en abyme* André Gide fiataalkori műveiben” [Similarity and Self-Reflection – *Mise en abyme* in André Gide’s Early Writings], in *Filológiai Közöny*, (2006) Vol. 52. No. 1-2, pp.75-89.

„Kánonteremtő szándék a magyar gyermek- és ifjúsági irodalomban” [Attempts at Canon-Making in Hungarian Children’s and Juvenile Literature], in *Iskolakultúra*, (2006) Vol. 16. No. 3, pp. 143-144.

„Description as Self-Reflection in Justh Zsigmond’s *Művész szerelem*” in *Hungarian Studies*, (2005) Vol. 19. No. 2, pp. 277-293.

Translations:

Christine Baron: “A metaleptikus hatás és a fikcionális beszédmódok státusa”, in: Beáta Thomka (ed.): *Narratívák* [Narratives], Vol. 6. Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2007 pp. 254–269.

Philippe Daros: “Kerethatások és a reprezentáció anakronizmusa”, in *Filológiai Közöny*, (2006) Vol. 52. No. 1-2, pp. 64-75.